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AUTHOR Morgan, Valda B.; Karr-Kidwell, P. J.
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ABSTRACT

Supported employment opportunities can help to meet the transition needs of individuals enrolled in special education programs. A review of related literature discusses characteristics of supported employment program participants, the need for individual transition planning, the school's role and responsibility, vocational planning, benefits, interagency collaboration, program effectiveness, and federal funding. Based on a pilot study of supported employment in schools in Denton, Texas, benefits of supported employment participation were found to include encouraging students at risk of dropping out to remain in school, increased collaboration with service agencies, and students' receipt of comparable wages for comparable work. Recommendations for supported employment participation focus on supervision by the job coach, vocational training by the job coach, job placement, and payment of at least minimum wage. The paper concludes that with funding, supported employment programs are certainly worth the energy, commitment, and investment. The paper also concludes that a comprehensive supported employment program can help relieve parents of apprehensive feelings as they approach the crossroads of academic or vocational training. (Contains 31 references.) (JDD)

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SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT:

A COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

FOR MILDLY MENTALLY RETARDED YOUTH

Valda B. Morgan, M. Ed.
Teacher, Denton Independent School District

P. J. Karr-Kidwell, Ph.D.
Professor, Texas Woman's University, Denton, TX.

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INTRODUCTION

In an effort to fulfill mandates outlined by the federal government for the development of transition plans of persons enrolled in special education programs, the individual transition team (ITT) faces significant challenges. A primary need for these students is supported employment (Falvey, 1989). Supported employment, however, encompasses several models, but two frequently utilized models are the individual or job coach model and the group placement model (Wehman, 1992).

Wehman (1992) reports that the federal government has provided discretionary grant programs since 1986 for establishing model demonstration projects for maintaining effective supported employment programs. These model projects have provided training for more than 20,000 persons including professionals, parents and business communities.

While the U. S. Congress provides funding for newly administered pieces of legislation, Meers (1987) states this funding is available for a limited time. Since Congress places the responsibility of public education on the states, funding for programs such as supported employment and transition becomes a key issue for the local education agency and is one of the major challenges facing the ITT as plans are being developed to guide students through a smooth and successful transition process.

The federal government has implemented mandates for meeting the transition needs of individuals enrolled in special education programs.

Fulfilling the requirements of these mandates at the local education level is often financially draining (McCaughrin, Ellis, Rusch, & Heal, 1993). Additionally, McCaughrin et al. (1993) discuss fiscal prudence as a major factor in maintaining an effective supported employment program. Because of a lack of funds and limited availability of federal funding, other avenues of financial support must be sought as a means of fulfilling federal mandates.

The acquisition of funding is necessary if school districts plan to prepare their students for successful transition. Martella (1991) and Wissick (1991) assert that the best and most logical way to guide students through a smooth transition process is to place and train in the environments for which we, as educators, are attempting to prepare those students.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Supported employment is a means of allowing individuals with handicapping conditions an opportunity to work at specific jobs earning at least minimum wage (Muklewicz & Bender, 1988). The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986, also known as PL 99-506, refer to supported employment as pay for real work in integrated environments for no fewer than twenty hours per week. Supported employment works well for many and has dramatically positive outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Wehman, 1992).

There are specific variables that must be present to consider the

effectiveness of a supported employment program, and because of such considerations, authors such as Wacker, Fromm-Steege, Berg, & Flynn (1989) place these variables in phases that include: job development, job placement, job training, follow-up and eventually fading of the job coach and any other reinforcers. The passage of the Carl Perkins Vocational Act of 1984 now provides services to facilitate the implementation of these phases. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) in 1985 issued a related initiative: supported employment was to be a primary service option for individuals with mental retardation (Falvey, 1989). In addressing the OSERS initiative, Falvey's (1989) view on supported employment represents outcomes rather than programs, with the primary outcomes as related to paid meaningful work performed in natural settings with ongoing training approaches. Muklewicz & Bender (1988) continue to characterize supported employment as meeting the participant's need for reliable transportation. Additionally, Meers (1987) states that in America, 3.6 million young children begin school each fall and approximately 15% of these children are identified as handicapped. Edgar (1988) further reports that 70% to 80% of all high school special education students are identified in three categories: learning disabled, mildly mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed. The number of students receiving special education services during the 1988-89 school year, according to Ficke (1992), was nearly 4.6 million. Their ages ranged from birth through age 21 and their

disabilities were varied. During fiscal year 1988, just over 217,000 persons with a disability were rehabilitated into employment situations that resulted in the disabled receiving wages. In concluding, Ficke (1992) noted that during the 1989 calendar year, over 415,000 new awards for Social Security Disability Insurance Benefits (SSDI) were made with an average payment of about $555.00 per month per recipient.

Characteristics of Supported Employment Program Participants

In identifying these persons with such disabilities, Test, Hinson Solow, and Keul (1993) conclude that they are consumers of supported employment while the Texas Education Agency (TEA) describes these supported employment participants as individuals with mental or physical impairments that would limit their ability to be self-sufficient. These students are believed to be capable of successfully participating in Vocational Education for the Handicapped (VEH) programs, but may require additional support, especially since their instructional arrangement is traditionally self-contained.

The America 2000 Initiative underscores related future needs of the disabled as commitment, competence and lifelong learning. In an effort to meet the future vocational needs of these individuals, emphasis should focus on the environments where all students of all ages and ability levels must

learn to use their minds and must be prepared for productive employment in today's economy (Kiernan & Lynch, 1992).

Transition Planning

Wehman (1992) reports that in order for individual transition planning to be meaningful, both students and parents need to be actively involved. Furthermore, Brotherson, Berdine & Sartini (1993) believe that educators and transition specialists should offer parents support, as their participation in the transition process is vital. This parent participation is imperative since parents are the most effective advocates for their students and parents influence their students' values and choices (Benz & Halpern, 1987). Transition planning from school to work, however, is a complex undertaking. Morgan, Moore, McSweyn, & Salzberg (1992) concur that such achievement is possible through a careful evaluation process paired with related outcomes.

The Developmental Disabilities Act of 1984, also known as Public Law 98-527 (Federal Register, 1984), and Education for All Handicapped Act, Public Law 101-476 strongly emphasize employment as a primary outcome and the development of a transition plan for handicapped students respectively. Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, also known as Public Law (PL 101-336), plus other initiatives concerning supported employment and transition from school to work and

maintaining an interest in the roles of the disabled in employment are more important (Dietl, 1990; Kiernan & Schalock, 1989; Rusch, 1990).

The School's Role and Responsibility

Subsequently, the school's role and responsibility for transition planning for students varies depending on their specific disabilities (Meers, 1987). As recently as 1990, the National Association of School District Special Education Directors began requiring the implementation of transition plans by the sixteenth birthday of individuals receiving special education services Morgan et al., 1992). Morgan et al. (1992) cite five activities they believe to be necessary for this type of successful transition from school to work as: (1) teaching social skills, such as appropriate greetings, shaking hands in lieu of hugging, and referring to authority figures by their name or position title instead of as mom or dad. Also, social skills like "when to take breaks" and "when to return to work" after the break time has expired, are important (2) teaching job skills, which involves teaching participants actual parts of a job through task analysis until the participant can perform the entire job with minimal assistance, (3) career exploration, which involves exposing supported employment participants to a variety of careers. This can occur either through vocational training for a specified time period or by way of observing other persons while they are performing the routines of their jobs, (4) teaching community skills such as: how to use public transportation and how to locate and participate in community activities like recreational

facilities. This would also involve teaching students how to access the services of the public library, and the post office, and (5) matching student skills to jobs, which would require the school staff to engage in informal observations of students performing specific tasks. The students' ability level and willingness to perform the job are measured prior to placing them in specific jobs. Wehman, Moon, Everson, Wood and Barcus (1988) identify a similar hierarchy of multi-team input for transition planning that includes the individual transition, local inter-agency and state level inter-agency teams.

Since candidates for supported employment are receiving more exposure to these normalized experiences, parents even believe their students are ready for competitive employment (McDonnell & Hardman, 1985; Morgan et al., 1992; Valera, 1982; Wehman et al., 1988). Thus, transition planning becomes emphatic.

Vocational Planning

While transition planning is an important facet in relation to supported employment, it cannot be successful if it is not fully implemented. The first step toward fulfilling the objectives addressed in the Individual Transition Plan (ITP) is vocational training (Meers, 1987; Morgan et al., 1992). According to Edgar (1988), aggressive vocational training for prospective, supported employment participants includes training on general skills like:

(1) dependability by arriving to work on time, (2) scheduling time off in advance, (3) doing those things that are required and following through on promises, (4) social interactions, (5) responding to directions and feedback, like listening and responding as well as asking questions when there is a degree of uncertainty about expectations, and (6) learning to be honest. These students had a greater chance of securing work and staying employed after high school than their peers who did not experience vocational training at the secondary level (Hasazi & Clark, 1988).

The National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education (1984) also identifies goals of secondary vocational education as assisting students with communication; this might involve utilization of appropriate communication devices if one does not have adequate speech skills. Written communication skills may also be included in this category. Computational skills such as the ability to use technological equipment like calculators, computers, audio-visual devices, and office machines, as well as employability and personal skills with an emphasis on lifelong learning are significant skills. Brolin (1989) cites a 1984 personal communication with Maynard Reynolds, which relates social and personal skills as well as employability and efficient life skills as real determinants of survival.

With this concept in mind, Brolin (1989) indicates that almost everyone is born with a desire or need to work, as work is viewed as the cornerstone by which adults are generally judged. Hasazi & Clark (1988),

Test, Grossi, & Keul (1988) and Test et al. (1993) further solidify this train of thought, concurring that supported employment program participants who receive training in the previously identified skill areas usually experience a higher level of vocational success after high school.

Benefits of Supported Employment

A positive benefit for persons in supported employment, according to McCaughrin, Ellis, Rusch, & Heal (1993), is an improved quality of life when compared to working in sheltered environments. Wehman, Kregel, & Revell (1991) reported that nationally, there were more than 70,000 supported employment placements with 65% as individual placements. An additional benefit of supported employment was the likelihood of improving participant's self-esteem. For example, self-esteem can be elevated by viewing oneself as a contributing member of the community. This can occur through employment and receiving comparable wages for comparable work.

This benefit was revealed in D'Amico and Marder's (1991) study of youth involved in supported employment. The results indicated that employment for individuals with handicaps such as mild mental retardation and learning disability increased from 50% to 67%. Receiving substantial wages and satisfaction with their jobs were rated highest among the youth participating in the study. Many anticipated job advancement.

Beyond an improved self-esteem, these supported employment participants can develop positive interactions with non-handicapped individuals. Falvey (1989) suggests that these interactions are possibly the most favorable examples of a true sense of community for handicapped individuals. McCaughrin et al. (1993) report that supported employment participants with mild mental retardation experience more opportunities for interactions with non-handicapped co-workers than their counterparts who participate in sheltered or no form of employment. Other avenues of co-worker interactions are identified by Johnson (1992) as associations with training and evaluation as well as being advocates for the supported employment participant. Reportedly, these involvements occurred at least monthly.

Inter-Agency Collaboration

While the effects of positive co-worker interactions are valuable, the role of inter-agency collaboration is of equal value. To begin, Hasazi & Clark (1988) reaffirm that local inter-agency agreements between special education, vocational rehabilitation, and employment training agencies are excellent mechanisms for locating and utilizing human and financial resources. Utilization of inter-agency collaboration assists students with their integration in the mainstream of the community as well as life after

high school (TEA, 1988). The importance of inter-agency cooperation cannot be over-emphasized when developing plans for students. Edgar (1988), Falvey (1989), Hasazi & Clark (1988), Meers (1987), Morgan et al. (1992), Wacker et al. (1989), and Wehman (1992) refer, to varying extents, to the collaborative efforts which must be developed and implemented. In order for success to prevail, there must be follow-ups and transitions from school environments to post-school settings. Likewise, Wehman (1992) cites that federal legislation such as The Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act (98-524), the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986 (PL 99-506), and the Education for the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1990 (PL 101-476) require inter-agency cooperation when planning for vocational outcomes for the handicapped.

Program Effectiveness

With the implementation of prior issues concerning supported employment, the ongoing program effectiveness becomes an issue, requiring the attention of those personnel involved with the program. Maintenance of an effective program can result through continuous marketing and job development, job matching through assessment, job coaching and follow-along services (Falvey, 1989). Wehman et al. (1988) cite that to be effective, supported employment programs depend upon consistent communications

among all parties, strong administrative organization and innovative personnel management. Related issues that Edgar (1988) refers to when maintaining an effective program include an emphasis on both the problem-solving and coping skills of program participants. Lastly, McCaughrin et al. (1993) cite fiscal prudence as a major factor in maintaining the effectiveness of a supported employment program.

Background on Federally Funded Programs

Traditionally, funding for programs such as supported employment is available for limited time periods and must be sought by schools, agencies, and universities via competition. Gonzalez (1991) reported her findings on Federal Grant Funding for individuals with handicaps during the 1984 fiscal year. The purpose of her research was to determine the correlation between OSERS- recommended project activities and activities which actually occurred through the funded projects. In addition to activities the research also focused on inter-agency collaboration, access of community services by project participants, support services and training. These 1984 projects were model programs, designed to assist individuals with handicaps to transition from school to post-school activities, preferably productive work. According to Gonzalez (1991), as of early March 1984, OSERS had awarded $1,500,000.00 in grants to 15 model projects. These projects were

funded for up to three years. The subjects for this report were identified as fifteen grant recipients from 11 states and the District of Columbia. Geographical regions represented were: the northeast with eight projects, the midwest with three projects, the northwest with two projects and one project, each for the southwest and the south. Universities were awarded nine, the majority of the grants. Only one local education agency and one state education agency received grants. Funding, according to Gonzalez (1991), ranged in amounts of $80,000 to $120,000 per year. Two projects, however, were awarded more than $120,000 annually.

As for inter-agency collaboration, this research indicated that all grant recipients cited at least one other entity with which to coordinate services. The majority of the projects identified businesses or similar organizations for the coordination of services for individuals with handicaps as they were engaged in transition. Other identified agencies included: (1) vocational rehabilitation agencies, (2) state education departments and (3) community colleges. After a thorough description of the grant recipients, allocation of funds, and the level of involvement from other agencies with the projects, Gonzalez (1991) identified the population which received services provided by the projects. They were youths between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one with disabilities such as, but not limited to, behavior disorders,

emotional disorders and physical or sensory challenges. These conditions of handicap are just a few of the identifications. It was also addressed that these program participants were more likely to experience difficulty in attempts to utilize community services without the transition assistance made available through the granted programs.

Gonzalez (1991) also reported on the purposes of the projects. She stated that common purposes, identified by most of the projects, were to utilize the resources of the community, supplement the current school program and to demonstrate the project's effectiveness.

It was also revealed that OSERS required the grant recipients to incorporate the Individual Education Plan (IEP) as a catalyst when conducting project activities. Additionally, Gonzalez (1991) identified anticipated employment outcomes and inter-agency collaboration as two areas of emphasis as project activities were engaged. After final project reports were reviewed it became evident that employment outcomes had been modified. These modifications were necessary to meet needs of the project, more specifically the finances and staff time.

Grant recipients provided detailed summary reports for OSERS. Within those reports, many projects cited similar strengths and weaknesses of the programs. In particular, five projects reported transportation was a

significant deterrent when trying to manage the activities of the projects in order for the participants to yield the greatest benefit. Mulkewicz & Bender (1988) also cited transportation as a key element to successful transition for persons engaged in supported employment activities. Furthermore, Gonzalez (1991) reported that six of the 15 projects experienced problems with personnel. Staff turnover was high paired with the inability to locate and hire qualified employees. Despite the drawbacks addressed in the summary reports of the grant projects, Gonzalez's (1991) summary of her report indicated that some 1,000 youths had made a smooth transition from school to work or some other post school setting.

This bottom-line statement seems to capture the essence. With funding, supported employment programs are certainly worth the energy, commitment , and investment particularly if, over three years, 1,000 individuals from selected regions of the country were actually eased into transition.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PARTICIPATION

Through supported employment participation, students with mild mental retardation are exposed to real and competitive forms of work in environments in which individuals with handicaps are of the minority. Since it is the responsibility of the public schools to ensure that all students graduating from these institutions are prepared for

life and the real world, the same expectation is required for individuals with mental retardation. Therefore, as a means of preparing these individuals for successful transition from school to post-school settings, supported employment programs reportedly are the instructional arrangement of choice. The following recommendations should be considered for effective supported employment programs:

1. Participants should be closely supervised by a job coach whose responsibility is to make sure that the supported employment participants can independently perform all parts of their job descriptions.

2. Participants should be paid at least minimum wage.

3. In order for students to benefit from the work environment, they should receive vocational training from a specific individual--the job coach.

4. The choices of participants should be considered when placing them in work environments.

In addition to the above recommendations, individuals involved in supported employment should be enrolled in special education, must be at least sixteen and their instructional arrangement should be identified as self-contained. Each of the participants should have an active Individual Transition Plan (ITP) and function within the mild range of mental retardation. Participation in supported employment is usually recommended and agreed upon by the Admission, Review & Dismissal (ARD) committee.

This author has discovered, through a two year pilot study on supported employment, that such participation has encouraged students considered to be at-risk of dropping out to remain in school. There was also a noticeable link to improved behavior and self-discipline. The students in supported employment began to understand more realistically the relationship between classroom activities and the expectations of employers. Some of those activities were: completion of job applications, money management, mock interview techniques, emphasis on grooming and personal hygiene and following directions. There were also areas of vocabulary development, simulated vocational activities, and time management skills. These prior exposures paved the way toward an increased level of success for the students in the pilot study as they became involved in supported employment and even later in life, if they desired to change jobs.

Another short-term benefit for program participants realized by the pilot study was the receipt of comparable wages for comparable work. Additionally, supported employment participants formed a bond with their job coaches, and from this bond, strong friendships were formed that could last well beyond the worker-coach relationship. Overall, these young students are evidence that one values self-worth based on his or her ability to work. There is not a more rewarding short-term benefit as when one receives pay for a job well done.

During the implementation phases of the supported employment pilot study, there were other benefits. For example, collaboration with agencies like Denton County Mental Health Mental Retardation Center (DCMHMR), Texas Rehabilitation Commission (TRC), and the Association for Retarded Citizens-Denton (ARC). DCMHMR provided job coaches for students participating in the school supported employment program who also happened to be receiving services with them The Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA) provided wages for qualifying students through a work expereince assignment that lasted for a specified period of time. At the end of the work experience, the business for which the student worked, hired the student, paying at least minimum wage. The TRC provided vocational assessments for students who were referred through the ARD meeting. Parents of the supported employment participants were actively involved. They contacted friends and family members who owned businesses or whomever happened to have influence in the work place, and encouraged these employers regarding our efforts to place students in work situatons. Our parents usually embraced supported employment with optimism. They often allowed their students to make choices about career activities offered and seemed to support both the student and the program favorably.

During this pilot study for supported employment students have received training in areas such as cabinetry, clerical, and custodial. Other areas

included laundry and dry cleaning, day care, food service and horticulture. Some of the students engaged in activities at the campus level that included the school library, attendance office, reception-front office, and classroom aide positions.

As a means of informing the community about supported employment, this first author developed a brochure which responded to often-asked questions. Personal contacts such as providing brief presentations or overviews at meetings of groups like the Special Education Advisory Committee, Permanency Planning Advisory Committee and the Denton Education Association were made, enhancing the community awareness effort. A slide presentation was developed, representing various cooperating businesses and the participants engaged in their work at these sites.

CONCLUSIONS

As students with mild mental retardation prepare to exit from high schools, educators, parents and officials from other agencies are faced with an array of issues. To begin, these persons are responsible for the students' transition plans, related development, implementation and review. Teams of parents, professionals and others are formed to serve on these students' ARD and ITT committees. These committees meet and discuss avenues that will make the transitions from school to post-school settings move more smoothly.

There are a variety of options available for these mildly mentally retarded youths. Some of these options include vocational training, career exploration, sheltered employment and supported employment. The most ideal, and oftentimes most realistic option is supported employment. Supported employment involves on-the-job training at its finest.

Students with mild mental retardation are placed in a business to perform a specific task. A job coach teaches assigned students how to do the task. First, smaller parts of the task are taught, then the task in its entirety. The job coach also monitors for quality control. As the students become more proficient at the task, the job coach begins to fade from the proximity of supported employment participants. Eventually, the job coach leaves the environment, making periodic checks.

Ideally, the supported employment activity takes place during a portion of the school day. This enables students to attend classes on the school campus. They will be able to continue to develop functional skills in a structured, closely monitored environment.

Supported employment is an ideal option for students with disabilities like mild mental retardation, according to research, yet funding for such programs is limited. The federal government originally made funding available through grant competitions, however, these funds were available for limited periods of time, usually no more than three years. Authors such as McCaughrin, Ellis, and Heal believe that supported employment

programs must be adequately funded and managed in order to maintain supported employment program effectiveness.

It seems that parents are beginning to see the value of an effective supported employment program, especially since their students have become involved in supported employment at the local level. Parents of students in supported employment activities at the Denton High/Ryan Campus are pleased with the opportunities their students' experience. The parents of students who are not currently participating in supported employment want to know when their students will begin to participate in such a program.

The educational process for mildly, mentally retarded individuals becomes vague and for some, confusing especially as these persons enter senior high school, grades nine through twelve. Given this first author's eight years of experience at the senior high school level, through participation in ARD meetings, guiding students and parents through the course selection process as they make decisions about classes, and the overall development of the IEP (based on approved course selection options), the crossroads of academic or vocational training frequently presents a dilemma for parents. A comprehensive, supported employment program as a vocational option for these students could help relieve parents of some apprehensive feelings as they approach such crossroads.

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